

## The Delta Queen!

I should have realized we were being setup. About a year ago leading questions such as, “Pastor, have you and Mrs. Pope ever considered going on a Caribbean cruise?” My answer was always, “Well, if you want to know the truth, my wife and I do have a dream cruise in mind.” I went on to say, “But it won’t be anytime soon – we’ll have to get all the kids through college first.” These investigators were relentless; they continued, “What do you have in mind?” Without knowing of their probing with a purpose, I unloaded my dream.

I explained how I love American history, especially the Civil War era. I also appreciate the writings of Mark Twain and the influence of steamboat travel. An event that could tie both together would be an old-fashioned steamboat cruise on one of the great rivers in America. Without our knowing even a hint of their planning, the precious flock at Christchurch sacrificially gave to make this adventure a reality!

We have just concluded the Civil War Cruise on the legendary Delta Queen on the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers, and my dear wife and I want to take advantage of these few lines to say, “Thank you!” I could have read up on the facts of the tour ahead of time, but I chose to allow much of it to be a surprise. And what a trip full of delightful surprises!

As we walked onto the steamboat, we were in awe of four decks of nostalgic splendor. We had one of the nicest rooms on the boat – a corner room just above the paddlewheel. As we stepped out our stateroom door, all America became our front porch. Soon after boarding we saw “Abraham Lincoln” standing in the purser’s line, who, of course, is James Getty, the foremost Lincoln impersonator. History came alive the night Mr. Getty portrayed Lincoln.

Standing next to Mr. Getty was Dr. James I. Robertson, Jr., a Virginia Tech professor who is perhaps the greatest expert alive today on the Civil War. He wrote the best biography of Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson to date. He published the lost “Jackson’s Maxims” which were found in the 1990s. Throughout the week Dr. Robertson took us on the offshore excursions to places such as the Battle of Donelson and the Battle of Shiloh. What an honor to be standing where General Albert Sydney Johnston died and having the details explained by Dr. Robertson. We got to know this man to the point that I believe I may now call him friend.

In the middle of the week Bobby Horton and his wife boarded the Delta Queen. He is the man that most of you have heard, but never seen. He is unarguably the best-informed man on the music written and appreciated during the Civil War. He has played on Ken Burns’ “The Civil War” which was on PBS. He more recently provided much of the music for the PBS series on Mark Twain. Bobby gave us two concerts. I might add we hit it off in a grand way. Into the night and morning we talked about the Lord and music.

We also met the Willetts, a husband and wife team who have written on the Civil War, the most recent being about the Battle of Day’s Gap, when Nathan Bedford Forrest defeated Union forces with a Gideon-like tactic. The Willetts hosted the tour of this site with narration.

The scenery was beautiful! It was lush with deep greens, occasional rustic looks, azure blue sky, flat plains, hills, and finally as we approached Chattanooga, we saw the mountains! It was the way we could only imagine much of America looked over one hundred years ago.

The service and food was plentiful. Everyone was accommodating and treated us like royalty. From the men who took our luggage, to the waiters, the musicians and lecturers – everyone was so helpful.

I would be remiss if I did not tell you the spiritual impact. Mrs. Pope and I enjoyed the scenery, the water, and even the cadence of the steam-powered paddlewheel that was most conducive to prayer and meditation. I saw one of the most gorgeous sunrises as early morning prayer was offered. An officer on the deck passed me several times with a small box around his neck with a key. He would go from station to station, insert the key and make a record. He was an officer whose title was "Watchman." I told him about the prophet Ezekiel who was made a watchman (Ezekiel 3:17). It was explained that the United States Coast Guard required them to clock into certain stations in all parts of the ship at specific times to assure that "eyes" were there. I was reminded that we need to be always accountable before the Lord, to be alert and watchful, "*Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain...*" (Revelation 3:2).

While sitting together at the bow of the boat, Barbara and I saw a bald eagle in full flight. He soared right toward us, passed us and went to a lofty tree in the mountainside. As he, with power and majesty, conquered and soared through the sky, I was reminded in illustrative wonder that "*They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles...*" (Isaiah 40:31).

We witnessed at the opportunities the Lord gave us. There was a gentleman, a fellow-passenger, to whom the Lord set me up to be a witness. He said to me, "I just can't believe it." He questioned the veracity of God's Word and His creation. After giving out the Gospel, I invited him to come and talk with me more if he so desired. He said, "No, I won't do that," and he did not. Then there was a crewmember named Sean Francis. I tried planting seeds when I saw him. Finally, one morning just as the sun was coming up, Sean passed me on the top deck. I said, "Sean, look at that. Only God can make something like that!" He heartily agreed and I asked him if he was saved and knew beyond a doubt that Christ was his and that heaven was his home. He told me he did not know, but he had been thinking about it and would like to know for sure. I said, "Do you have about five minutes more?" He said not right then. I asked, "Sean, when you get free, come see me, and we'll get this thing settled." In the late afternoon he found me outside our stateroom. He told me he came by twice and knocked on our door, but couldn't find us. In a few minutes after explaining the death, burial and resurrection of Christ and his need to repent and call upon the Lord in belief, he surrendered in child-like faith to Christ. What a contrast! I witnessed just as fervently to both men. One never came back to inquire and the other came three times until he found me and he believed on the Lord Jesus Christ! I was made aware again that all we can do is witness; only God can save! Some will not believe, some will and we should all be encouraged to keep witnessing because of those whom God alone knows will accept Christ.

Mrs. Pope and I want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts for the gift of the trip on the legendary Delta Queen. We shall never forget these days on the river; every day we were reminded of your magnanimous love to us. It was everything we imagined it to be...and more. We love you and appreciate all you've done for us. We shall never forget the Lord's kindness to us in making you the channel of His blessing.

Your Pastor and Forever Friend,  
Johnny Pope

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